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### Comparative Literature in India

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Calcutta

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**Volume 2 Issue 4 (December 2000) Article 10**

**Amiya Dev,**

**"Comparative Literature in India"**

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**Abstract:** In his article, "Comparative Literature in India," Amiya Dev bases his discussion on the fact that India has many languages and literatures thus representing an a priori situation and conditions of diversity. He therefore argues that to speak of an Indian literature in the singular is problematic. Nonetheless, Dev also observes that to speak of Indian literature in the plural is equally problematic. Such a characterization, he urges, either overlooks or obscures manifest interrelations and affinities. His article compares the unity and the diversity thesis, and identifies the relationship between Indian commonality and differences as the prime site of comparative literature in India. He surveys the current scholarly and intellectual positions on unity and diversity and looks into the post-structuralist doubt of homogenization of differences in the name of unity. Dev also examines the search for common denominators and a possible pattern of togetherness and Dev underlines location and located inter-Indian reception as an aspect of interliterariness. It is t/here Dev perceives Indian literature, that is, not as a fixed or determinate entity but as an ongoing and interliterary process: Indian language and literature ever in the re/making.

**Amiya DEV****Comparative Literature in India**

In this article, I discuss an apriori location of comparative literature with regard to aspects of diversity and unity in India, a country of immense linguistic diversity and, thus, a country of many literatures. Based on history, ideology, and often on politics, scholars of literature argue either for a unity of Indian literature or for a diversity and distinctness of the literatures of India. Instead of this binary approach, my proposal involves a particular view of the discipline of comparative literature, because I argue that in the case of India the study of literature should involve the notion of the interliterary process and a dialectical view of literary interaction. Let me begin with a brief account of linguistic diversity: previous censuses in 1961 and 1971 recorded a total of 1,652 languages while in the last census of 1981 some 221 spoken languages were recorded excluding languages of speakers totaling less than 10,000. Many of the 221 language groups are small, of course, and it is only the eighteen listed in the Indian Constitution as major languages which comprise the bulk of the population's speakers. In addition to the eighteen languages listed in the Constitution, four more are recognized by the Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of Letters) for reasons of their significance in literature (Assamese, Bengali, Dogri, Indian English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kankani, Kashmiri, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Panjabi, Rajasthani, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu). However, this total of twenty-two major languages and literatures is deceiving because secondary school and university curricula include further languages spoken in the area of the particular educational institution. This diversity in languages and literatures, however, is not reflected in either the general social discourse or in literary scholarship. In general, the perspective of India as a hegemonious language and literature area is ubiquitous.

We are all aware that the so-called major Indian literatures are ancient -- two of them (Sanskrit and Tamil) ancient in the sense of Antiquity while the rest of an average age of eight to nine hundred years -- except one recent arrival in the nineteenth century as an outcome of the colonial Western impact (Indian English). We also know that although some of these literatures are more substantial than others and contain greater complexities, no further gradation into major and minor major ones is usually made. A writer in any one is counted as much Indian by the Sahitya Akademi as a writer in any other and no distinction is made between one literature prize and another. Thus, while we have a plurality of so-called major literatures in India, we are confronted by a particular problematic: Is Indian literature, in the singular, a valid category, or are we rather to speak of Indian literatures in the plural? Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western Indologists were not interested in this question, for Indian literature to them was mainly Sanskrit, extended at most to Pāli and Prakrit. For example, with all his admiration for *Sakuntala*, William Jones was oblivious of literatures in modern Indian languages. Non-Indian Indianists today, too, are more often than not uninterested in the question. Although they do not consider Sanskrit-Pāli-Prakrit as "the" only literature of India, these scholars are still single literature specialists. Similarly, literary histories written in India by Indian scholars also focused and still focus on a single literature.

This single-focus perspective is a result of both a colonial and a post-colonial perspective, the latter found in the motto of the Sahitya Akademi: "Indian literature is one though written in many languages" (Radhakrishnan). However, this perspective was opposed by scholars who argued that a country where so many languages coexist should be understood as a country with literatures (in the plural). The argument was formal and without any serious political overtones, only insisting that instead of Indian literature, singular, we should speak of Indian literatures, plural. Presently, a different kind of resistance has emerged to the unity thesis in the form of what may be called "hegemonic apprehensions." This perspective includes the argumentation that the designation "Indian literature" will eventually be equated with one of the major literatures of India, perhaps or likely with the largest single spoken language and literature. What speaks against this argument is that, for example, the literature of one of the smallest spoken languages -- of a non-Indian origin too -- is sometimes claimed to be the only truly Indian literature because of its freedom from

regional ties. In brief, arguments of unity in diversity are in my opinion suspect, for they encroach upon the individualities of the diverse literatures. In other words, a cultural relativist analogy is implied here, difference is underlined and corroborated by the fact that both writers and readers of particular and individual literatures are overwhelmingly concerned with their own literature and own literature only. It is from this perspective that to the Akademi's motto "Indian literature is one though written in many languages," the retort is "Indian literature is one because it is written in many languages."

The above briefly outlined problem of unity in diversity and its perspectives are the bases of Comparative Literature as a discipline in India. Let me first mention Gurbhagat Singh who has been discussing the notion of "differential multilogue" (see Singh). He does not accept the idea of Indian literature as such but opts for the designation of literatures produced in India. Further, he rejects the notion of Indian literature because the notion as such includes and promotes a nationalist identity. As a relativist, Singh accords literatures not only linguistic but also cultural singularities. With regard to the history of comparative literature as a discipline, he rejects both the French and the American schools as well as the idea of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*. Instead, he argues for a celebration of difference and has anticipated Charles Bernheimer's much discussed *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*. For Singh, comparative literature is thus an exercise in differential multilogue. His insistence on the plurality of logoi is particularly interesting because it takes us beyond the notion of dialogue, a notion that comparative literature is still confined to. Singh's proposal of differential multilogue as a program will perhaps enable us to understand Indian diversity without sacrificing the individualities of the particulars. Singh's notion of differential multilogue reflects a poststructuralist trend in Indian discourse today, a trend that manifests itself among others by a suspicion of the designation of Indian literatures as one. One of the reasons for this suspicion is that the key to the notion is held centrally, whether by an institution or a synod of experts leading to an accumulation of power. If we agree that power is the most ubiquitous social evil then the more decentralization the better. Decentralization minimizes the aggression from above as well as impels grass-roots movements from below. In such a situation, the matter of difference is thus thoroughly contextualized. In literature, difference does not deny the possibility of interliterary spaces but, on the contrary, welcomes them provided they do not come as a program of action organized from above. The notion of difference and interliterary processes has, in fact, recently engaged Indian scholars with regard to the problematics of inter-Indian translation particularly in the day-to-day interaction of different languages (for a full-fledged theoretical framework of the interliterary process, see Durisin; Gálík at <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss4/8>>). If difference is understood and enacted as self-containment and concomitant self-complacency, then there is a problem with regard to the concept of mutuality. However, poststructuralism understands difference as a notion of inclusion, that is, mutuality. Thus, it cannot accept the single-focus category "Indian" without deconstructing its accompanying politics. In other words, if the deconstruction of politics involves the weeding out of things excessively local or peripheral, it is appropriate because all value-loading is suspect. If, on the other hand, "Indian" is a mere description, a general signifier, then there is no need for the act of deconstruction. Poststructuralism is by no means purist; what matters more than anything else is the historical perspective that upholds difference. In turn, if we deconstruct this predilection for difference, we will see that our predilection is not so much a matter of *Weltanschauung* but rather a reaction to the possibility of power accumulation in the name of "Indian literature." If Indian literature had not been so heavily publicized and hammered down, as it were, into our national psyche, if our individual literatures had been left alone and not asked to pay their dues to "Indian literature," there would be no resistance to the notion of unity in diversity. And it cannot be denied that in the pursuit of "Indian literature" some of us have shown negative discrimination towards texts produced in "less important" and "different" literatures. The poststructuralist stance is particularly wary of rhetoric in the name of integration and a call to emotion in the name of nation runs against its basic principles. Nationalism and fundamentalism of any type are built on regimentation and exclusion.

Yet, there are some problems with poststructuralism in Indian scholarly discourse and that is the prominence of theory to the detriment or non-existence of application. Instead of fitting theory to the experience of literature, the latter is fit to theory, thus resulting in an over abundance of meta-theory. Ironically, Indian poststructuralism inflicts upon itself a sameness with difference-speakers elsewhere and does not seem to recognize that difference-speaking in India may be different from difference-speaking elsewhere. At the same time, this poststructuralism does not seem to recognize that given all the differences pertaining to the Indian experience, underlying it and tying together the different entities, there may be a commonality, a *sensus communis* of a broadly cultural kind. Jaidev, criticising the fad of existentialist aestheticism in some contemporary Indian fiction, develops an argument for this cultural differential approach. However, and importantly, Jaidev's notion of an Indian *sensus communis* is not that routine Indianness which we often encounter from our cultural ambassadors or in the West, that is, those instances of "national" and racial image formations which suggest homogeneity and result in cultural stereotyping. The concept of an Indian *sensus communis* in the context of Singh's differential multilogue or Jaidev's differential approach brings me to the question of situs and theory. That is, the "site" or "location" of theory and of the theorist are important factors here. I am convinced that situs is as important as theorization, particularly in a country where the decolonization process is still incomplete and where a neo-colonial situation is in the making. A wrong theory is bad, but a right theory from a wrong situs is equally bad. It is situs that Tagore spoke of in many of his prose texts and it is situs that Gandhi so consistently practised. And in Indian Marxism, too, the question of situs has again and again appeared as a particular problematic. Now, if situs means cultural and linguistic rootedness then the notion of commonality is applicable, although we cannot ignore the danger of commonality turning itself into self-referentiality or even nationalism or racism. At this point of potential danger, the enactment of a dialectic may be the solution. Let the Indian theorist have his/her situs right by heeding to commonality, but let him/her also stand guard against commonality turning self-referential. In other words, the theorist must make sure that commonality will not be turned into an ideological and political commodity. But under no circumstances should the theorist deny commonality because of expediency or fear and neither should he/she take refuge in suggesting a superior and detached intellect. That way lies alienation, and alienation is a further aspect that the Indian theorist must resolutely resist.

Commonality and the oneness I am suggesting here as a primary situs of the Indian theorist and theory is not exactly the cultural commonality Jaidev had in mind in his critique of cultural pastiche, however. Jaidev's concept of oneness provides an ambience for particular concerns with regard to cultural and artistic expression such as the case of language overlaps, the bi- and multilinguality of authors and their readership, openness to different genres, the sharing of themes based in similar social and historical experiences, emphasis on the oral and performing modes of cultural and artistic transmission, and the ease of inter-translatability. On the other hand, these characteristics of Indian cultural commonalities Jaidev suggests in turn are rooted in a situs of the premodern age of Indian literatures (that is, in periods prior to the advent of print). Where Jaidev's structure is applicable, instead, is our contemporary literatures in India because it is here that the danger of a oneness construction -- the process of nation-state construction -- looms.

Another example where nation-state orientation and nation-state cultural and literary identity construction is discussed in detail is Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. Ahmad describes the construct of a "syndicated" Indian literature that suggests an aggregate and unsatisfactory categorization of Indian literature (see 243-85). Ahmad also rules out the often argued analogy of Indian literature with that of European literature by arguing that the notion of "European literature" is at best an umbrella designation and at worst a pedagogical imposition while Indian literature is classifiable and categorizable. Further, he argues that while European and African literatures have some historical signifiers in addition to their geographical designation, these are recent concepts whereas Indian homogeneity has the weight of tradition behind it. In Ahmad's argumentation, the problem is that in the "Indian" archive of literature, Indianness ultimately proves limited when compared with the differential literature comprised in each of the twenty-two literatures recognized by the Sahitya Akademi. While it is evident that in each of these

languages and literatures there is material taken from the others or another, their totality does not constitute one archive. Rather, they constitute twenty-two different archives. An "Indian" archive of literature as represented by an "English" archive -- while non-hegemonious on the one hand by removal from a differential archive but hegemonizing by a latent colonial attitude on the other -- also reflects the official language policy of the government: English, while not included in the Indian Constitution, is still recognized as a lingua franca of government, education, etc. For example, until recently the government sponsored the National Book Trust, an entity entrusted with the task of inter-Indian translation by a process of a first translation into English followed by translation from that into the other languages.

The notion of an "English" archive of Indian literature came about two decades ago by the suggestion of V.K. Gokak and Sujit Mukherjee who were speaking of an Indo-English corpus of literature that was created out of English translations of major texts from major Indian languages (see Mukherjee). Thus, the idea of Indian literature was authenticated and not only that, a history too was proposed for it with forms and techniques varying from age to age. Further, Gokak and Mukherjee suggested the canonization of their proposal by inserting the Indo-English corpus into university curricula. It was along these lines of ideology and political economy that a decade ago recommendations were made by a government committee to institute a Master's program in Indian literature following an undergraduate degree in any single Indian literature ("University Grants Commission Circular Letter"). Ahmad's concern is with the hegemony of English, although he does not suggest its abolition in a way which would be close to Ngugi's arguments. On the other hand, Gokak, Mukherjee, and Motilal Jotwani -- who was a committee member for drafting the above circular -- suggested to implement English as a function, owing to the ever-growing corpus of translations from the various Indian literatures into English, thus making this new corpus of Indo-English literature available to all. In turn, this new corpus would suggest an Indian communality resulting in a more or less homogeneous Indian literature. In addition to the argument against this construction of a national literature advanced by Ahmad, there are other problems with the notion and its implementation. It is true that the ideal of one language in India has been made real by now by ideological and political mechanisms. The official national language is Hindi and if literary texts from the other languages could be in toto translated into Hindi, we could possibly arrive at a national Indian literature. However, in this case we would again arrive at a hegemonizing situation. On the other hand, it is clear that in the realm of education, English is the largest single language program in our colleges and universities.

It is for the above reasons that I propose, instead, the notion mentioned previously: Indian literature is not an entity but an interliterary condition in the widest possible sense of the concept which is related to Goethe's original idea of *Weltliteratur* and its use by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*. The interliterary condition of India, we should remember, reaches back much farther than its manuscript or print culture. For instance, bhakti -- a popular religious movement as both theme and social issue (stretching from the eighth to the eighteenth century) - - had a variety of textual manifestations in various Indian languages. There are many other similar literary and cultural textualities in India whose nature, while manifest in different other systems of a similar nature are based primarily on themes or genres, forms and structures observable in historiography. It is possible, in other words, to think of a series of such sub-systems in which the individual literatures of India have been interrelated with one another over the ages. For example, Swapan Majumdar takes this systemic approach in his 1985 book, *Comparative Literature: Indian Dimensions*, where Indian literature is neither a simple unity as hegemonists of the nation-state persuasion would like it to be, nor a simple diversity as relativists or poststructuralists would like it to be. That is, Majumdar suggests that Indian literature is neither "one" nor "many" but rather a systemic whole where many sub-systems interact towards one in a continuous and never-ending dialectic. Such a systemic view of Indian literature predicates that we take all Indian literatures together, age by age, and view them comparatively. And this is the route of literary history Sisir Kumar Das has taken with his planned ten-volume project, *A History of Indian Literature*, whose first volume, *1800-1910: Western Impact / Indian Response*, appeared in 1991.



The approach Das has taken is methodologically pragmatic: He has a team of scholars working with him (at least one scholar for each language) who collect the initial data which he then processes through a number of checks resulting in a chronological history of literature. In it we have simultaneous listings of similar events from all the twenty-two recognized literatures: Authors' births and deaths, dates of text composition and publication, classification in genres, text dissemination, reception, literary reviews and their impact, literary society formations and debates, translations from both inside and outside, and so on. These constitute, on the one hand, literary data; but on the other hand they are also data of relevant social events. The mode of assortment will naturally vary from volume to volume depending on the nature of the data. The work Das proposed is not only a comparative chronology but it will include a narrative based on it. Of course, the narrative is his own reading of the chronology, and other readings are possible. One of the interesting conclusions he arrived at with the first volume in question and based on his reading of the established chronology, is a structure of pro-phanes and meta-phanes. Certain features of these -phanes may be generic, thematic, stylistic, or found to have appeared in one literature early, in another late. It is an engaging discovery and may also be true of the other ages. However, the underlying and most important finding is a pattern of commonality in nineteenth-century Indian literatures. Das's work on the literatures of the nineteenth century in India does not designate this Indian literature a category by itself. Rather, the work suggests a rationale for the proposed research, the objective being to establish whether a pattern can be found through the ages. One age's pattern may not be the same as another age's and this obviously preempts any given unity of Indian literature. Thus, Das's method and results to date show that Indian literature is neither a unity nor is it a total differential.

Interestingly, although Das does not call himself a comparatist and does not locate the project in that discipline, his work is comparatist. In many ways, Das's work is similar to K.M. George's two-volume *Comparative Indian Literature* of 1984-85 that was researched and published under the auspices of Kerala Sahitya Akademi. George's work was not as comprehensive as Das's: it only dealt with fifteen literatures and that too in a limited way. It had a generic bias, that is, it approached the literatures in terms of a few given genres. George's genealogy too is by and large given and not arrived at from the literatures themselves. In my view, George's work also demonstrates Western hegemony. Poetry, for instance, was discussed in terms of "traditional" and "modern" but as if traditional was exclusively Indian and modern the result of a Western impact. Another problem of George's two volumes was that although they were titled *Comparative Indian Literature*, there was no comparison built into the findings and the fifteen individual literatures were placed simply side by side. Thus, comparison was only suggested, that is, the reader was required to make whatever comparison was necessary or appropriate.

With regard to the inherently and implicitly advantageous discipline of comparative literature it is interesting that the Gujarati poet Umashankar Joshi -- a supporter of the unity approach -- was the first president of the Indian National Comparative Literature Association, while the Kannada writer U.R. Anantha Murthy is the current president of the Comparative Literature Association of India in addition to being the president of Sahitya Akademi. The discipline of comparative literature, that is, its institutional manifestation as in the national association of comparatists reflects the binary approach to the question of Indian literature as I explained above. However, the Association also reflects a move toward a dialectic. This is manifest in the fact that Murthy's approach concerns a subtle move away from the routine unity approach and towards aspects of inter-Indian reading. In other words, the method of Comparative Literature allows for a view of Indian literature in the context of unity and diversity in a dialectical interliterary process and situation. There was a time when I spoke in terms of an extra consciousness on the part of individual language writers: for Bengali literature, for instance, I saw a Bengali+, for Hindi literature a Hindi+, for Tamil literature a Tamil+, etc. My understanding of Indian literature consisted of the author's extra consciousness and not of an archivable entity as such but rather a state of mind in order to justify the unity of Indian literature. However, today, with a focus on reception and the theoretical premises offered by the notion of the interliterary process, I understand Indian literature as ever in the making.

Apart from reception studies, there are of course other aspects which support my understanding of Indian literature in an interliterary process: we are located in our own languages -- whether with an active or passive bilinguality -- where we have access to one or two other languages. Through inter-Indian translation we have also access to texts from a fourth and more languages. Now, as readers, consciously or subconsciously we place the texts in additional languages beside our original and first text. Or, one may say that alternatively these other language texts impel us to do so. Here is an example of this process: recently, while reading an early twentieth-century Oriya novel, I was reminded of an acclaimed pioneer of Bengali fiction. Thus, the case of Bengali influence on Oriya may be argued here, although evidence to the contrary may also be the case. Sisir Kumar Das's concept of pro- and meta-phanes may explain this, but my point here is whether or not we can use this active juxtaposition towards a possible commonality in genre history. Suppose my reading of a Marathi classic of the late nineteenth century induces a similar juxtaposition with a Malayalam novel of about the same time or a Hindi or Urdu or Gujarati novel. Juxtapositions do not mean that we have already made up our mind about the so-called Indian novel of the first phase and reduce these texts to their common denominator. On the other hand, the texts are very much themselves, the Oriya absolutely Oriya, the Marathi absolutely Marathi, and so on. This is far from setting up initial postulates for the Indian novel of the first phase and testing the texts against them. Thus, inter-Indian reception presupposes that our situs is in our first text, that is, first language literature. This is crucial for there is no no-man's land or neutral territory between Indian literatures.

Finally, let me assure you that, obviously, the problematics of unity and diversity are not unique to India. However, in keeping with my proposal that the situs of both theorist and theory is an important issue, I demonstrate here the application of the proposal. If I had discussed, for instance, Canadian diversity, it would have been from the outside, that is, from an Indian situs. I am not suggesting extreme relativism, but Comparative Literature has taught us not to take comparison literally and it also taught us that theory formation in literary history is not universally tenable. I am suggesting that we should first look at ourselves and try to understand our own situations as thoroughly as possible. Let us first give full shape to our own comparative literatures and then we will formulate a comparative literature of diversity in general.

Note: The present publication is an updated version of Amiya Dev, "Unity and Diversity in India and Comparative Literature," in *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice / La Littérature comparée à l'heure actuelle. Théories et réalisations*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Milan V. Dimic, and Irene Sywenky. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999. 65-74. Publication of the new version is by permission of Honoré Champion.

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